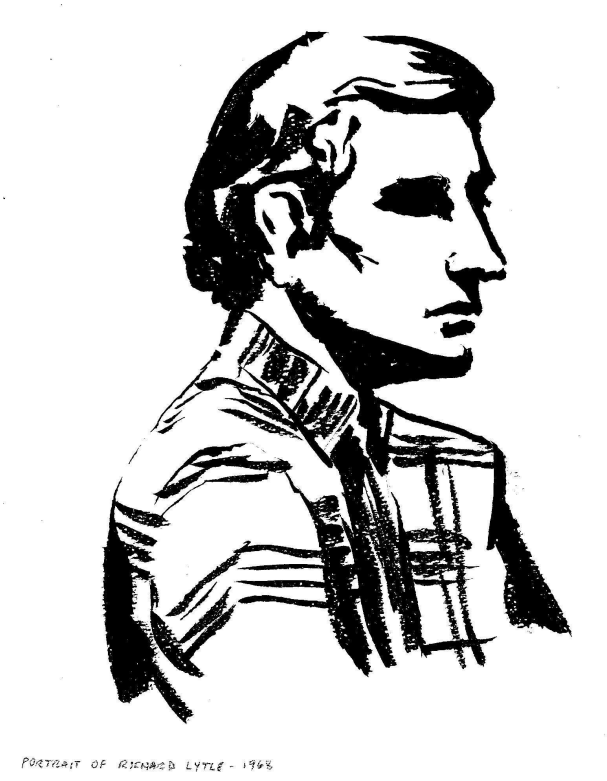
Notes on Studying Art at Yale

by Robert Horvitz (27 April 2012)

I entered Yale in 1965, intending to study political science & economics, but other subjects gradually attracted my attention. I had worked as a sign painter during my high school summers, so as a freshman I enrolled in a few graphic design courses. One was Color Theory, based on the ideas of Josef Albers. Albers had retired a few years earlier but his protégé, Sewell Sillman, continued the course. I never found a use for Albers' theories, but Sillman's eccentricity and charisma made each class special and his contour wave drawings had an enduring influence on me.

I also took Introduction to Graphic Design. The course was unusual in being open to both grad students and undergrads. The grad students were impressive: their personalities and ideas were quite developed and their work set technical standards we all strove to reach.



R. Horvitz, ink-brush portrait of Richard Lytle (1968)

At the start of my sophomore year, Richard Lytle, who chaired the undergraduate art department and taught drawing, reviewed my portfolio and let me skip first year drawing. Lytle was a dashing figure: as handsome as Paul Newman, silver-haired but with youthful energy – and what looked like a sword-fighting scar on his cheek. He found success early, being selected for MoMA's "16 Americans" show in 1959, where his paintings hung next to those of Frank Stella, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. But by the time we met he was putting more effort into administration and teaching than painting.

The students in his second year course were free to explore different media – charcoal, ink with brush and pen, watercolor, pencil, etc. – to which I added tools from graphic design – "Letraset" rub-on lettering and dot screens, rapidograph pens, collage and felt-tipped markers. Lytle's in-class assignments were traditional: nudes and still lifes. Verbal critiques aimed at getting us to look at our work as viewers do. I could already render figures, objects and scenes with fair accuracy, but I didn't find representation a necessary or sufficient reason for making art. Clement Greenberg had argued that illusions of a third dimension weaken two-dimensional art, and I generally agreed. So as the year progressed, my drawings became increasingly abstract (see next page). I tried to retain visual references to what we had been told to draw, but kept gravitating toward drawing as a process, as invention.

R. Horvitz, untitled ink-brush drawing from Richard Lytle's class (1968)

The summer between sophomore and junior years (1967) was pivotal. I got a job as a graphics researcher at Herman & Lees, a small firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which had won the US Department of Transportation contract to redesign the American road sign system. My job was, first, to read every research report available on road signs and legibility. Then I made hundreds of slides for perceptual testing - to find out which arrow-head shapes were most quickly recognized, which color combinations made signs stand out against various landscapes, the most readable typefaces, etc. I had never been required to make images so perfectly as at Herman & Lees, or to compare options so rigorously.

But probably of greater importance was losing my girlfriend during the summer. Angry and hurt, I threw myself into drawing with a passion that had nowhere else to go. I spent my evenings inking the silhouettes of plants collected from a nearby park and on weekends, I copied paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts. In the fall I signed up for Bernard Chaet's painting class and decided to major in art.

I had made a few paintings in high school but was not comfortable with the medium. It was messy and imprecise and I had no intuitions about color. Just before Christmas I told Mr. Chaet

that I planned to drop his course next semester to have more time to draw. I showed him samples of what I was working on and unexpectedly he said he would accept drawings in lieu of paintings and still give me credit for the course, so long as I met with him regularly and brought new drawings to each meeting. I was so grateful for his understanding. His art was even further away from mine than Lytle's, so it was quite remarkable that he never attempted to impose his esthetics on me – or on any of his other students.

At the end of the semester he helped me win departmental approval for a triple-credit independent study project in drawing. I had entered Yale with 7 Advanced Placement credits, which I saved for my senior year. So after my junior year I only needed 3 more course credits to graduate and the study project completely fulfilled that requirement. Thanks to Chaet's endorsement, in my senior year I was able to spend virtually all my time drawing.

Bernard Chaet also encouraged me to apply for the Carnegie Teaching Fellowship, which I won, so I stayed on at Yale for another year after graduating, working as Bob Reed's teaching assistant (it was his first year teaching at Yale) and leading my own College Seminar ("Advanced Drawing for Beginners"). My seminar was an attempt to teach drawing without relying on the techniques of representation – something I am still working on 40 years later.

Carnegie Fellows were supposed to take classes in the School of Art in addition to their teaching duties, but I didn't. With the arrogance of youth, I saw graduate courses in the fine arts as only useful to people who didn't know what they wanted to do.

Between graduation in 1969 and my year as a Carnegie Fellow, I attended the Yale Summer School of Music and Art in Norfolk, Connecticut. Norfolk's visual art faculty that summer included Mel Bochner, Ed Moskowitz and Robert Mangold. However, meeting music and art students from other universities was more central to the Norfolk experience than the faculty. I was the only student that year enrolled in both the music and visual arts programs. (It is worth noting that the 1960s were dominated by music – San Francisco rock, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, John Cage, Miles Davis, etc. I had more friends at Yale who were musicians than visual artists, and in addition to my art courses I studied history of music with Alejandro Planchart and music composition with Joan Panetti. My drawings still derive more inspiration from music than from the visual arts.)

As mentioned above, undergraduate art majors had few opportunities back then to mingle with the School of Art's grad students. However, the latter had individual work areas on the top floors of the Arts & Architecture Building and these were unenclosed. We could walk around and see work in progress and perhaps try to strike up a conversation with the creator. Chuck Close and Vijay Celmins were grad students then. They had already found the styles which would make them famous. I liked their work, even though in both cases it was representational, but I never met either of them.

The tension between abstraction and representation posed a serious dilemma for the teaching of visual art, as I've already suggested. Leading art magazines like *Artforum* were pushing "color-field painting" which not only did not depend on traditional drawing skills, it actively denied them. So there was a fairly large gap between what was being taught, particularly in Yale's

drawing courses, and what art students thought they needed to be successful. Indeed, most students were less interested in acquiring eye-hand skills of any sort than in developing a distinctively original style and finding a shortcut to fame. A related problem was that students tended to judge their teachers by how often they showed in New York, not by how much useful knowledge they imparted. In retrospect, this was unfair and narrow-minded. But it reflected the fact that our measure of success was a favorable mention in *Artforum* or interest from a good art dealer (preferably Leo Castelli), and that had nothing to do with the criteria used to grade students in art classes. Except on one crucial point: art students at Yale learned quite well how to justify and explain their work during "crits." And for better or for worse, the ability to articulate a convincing rationale became essential for career success, as the rationale behind an artwork gradually eclipsed the artwork's physical attributes in importance – a situation which Tom Wolfe lambasted memorably in *The Painted Word.*

As both a student and as a teacher, I saw great spiels turn used Kleenexes into timeless masterpieces – and observed that most Yalies are dangerously articulate. This seems to have caused a gradual deterioration in the quality of artwork, at Yale and elsewhere, as artists rely more and more on explanations and arguments to obscure their work's shortcomings.

When I left Yale, I lost the context in which my work had evolved. I had seen the power of verbal justification grow year by year and I was quite cynical about it. The emergence of conceptual art at this very moment (1969-1971) underscored the precariousness of the economic context for art, dependent as it was on the creation, promotion and collection of unique objects based on evaluations of their historical significance. As Lucy Lippard put it, tokens in the game of art were starting to de-materialize, which inevitably put the survival of art as a profession in doubt. With Yale no longer my frame of reference and art's survival at risk, I had to find new goals, new measures of success, which were *context-free*.

At Yale we were encouraged to look at our work "objectively," as if we hadn't made it. This always struck me as wrong: I am the only person whose relationship to the work is *not* as a viewer. Given the uniqueness of my position, shouldn't I optimize the experience of the making since I am the only one who can do it? This line of thinking led me to spend the first half of 1970 drawing with my eyes closed – to discover, for the first time really, what activities felt right, regardless of the marks left on paper. This was a way of unlearning what I had been taught, preparing new footings for future work.

Slowly, my blind scribbles, swirls and zigzags converged to a few basic gestures, and eventually to just one type of mark: a pen-flick. The split-second acceleration of the pen point attenuates the flow of ink so the track tapers and then disappears completely as the point leaves the paper. This leaves a comet-shaped mark about 1-2 cm long. Since the summer of 1970, all of my drawings have been made with just this one mark.

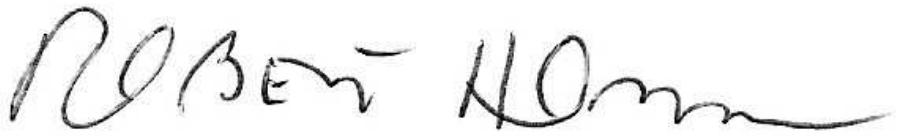
The year after I left Yale, I went up to Andover, MA, to teach studio art at Abbott Academy and Phillips Academy, which were in the process of merging. I mention this because one of my best students in 1971-2 was Peter Halley, who went on to become the Dean of Yale's Art School. It also renewed my relationship with Chris Cook, my painting teacher when I studied at Andover in

1963-5. Later, as director of the Addison Gallery, Chris would pull Jock Reynolds into museum work.

I returned to Yale in the spring of 1979 to teach another College Seminar: "American Art, 1946-1976: The New York Era." The thesis of this course was that New York's centrality in contemporary art came to an end when the editors of *Artforum* were fired for promoting artwork which could not be collected, and for publishing investigative articles about dubious transactions between art collectors and the museums on whose boards they served. Charles Cowles' firing of John Coplans and Max Kozloff (a detailed account of which was published in the *Village Voice*) shattered the illusion of *Artforum*'s independence from the financial interests of art marketers, which had given the magazine its extraordinary critical authority. All the magazine's staff writers and regular contributors quit in protest – including me – and the New York art scene never recovered from *Artforum*'s loss of credibility.

My seminar was a hit: 15 students were formally enrolled but the average attendance was more like 25-35. So many others came because the discussions were never less than electrifying. I had already agreed to repeat the seminar in the autumn semester, when my mother was diagnosed with cancer and I moved back to Ohio to take care of her. One thing led to another and I never returned to teach at Yale.

That left my relationship with Yale unfinished, so I'm glad it has resumed with the Art Gallery's decision to purchase 3 recent drawings. I cannot think of a better place for these drawings. Thanks, Jock! Thanks, Alexa! And thanks to everyone else involved in this decision.



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